San Luis Obispo - Cal Poly's Society of Women Engineers student chapter was named Outstanding Student Section in the nation at the society's recent national conference in Detroit, besting such major universities as Stanford and Purdue.

"We were competing against schools that should have blown us out of the water," said Jennifer Harris, a Cal Poly engineering graduate student and the campus chapter's immediate past president.

"We won in the 'large' category," Harris said, "so we were competing with schools many times our size, including Stanford, Texas A&M, Georgia Tech, Purdue and others."

Cal Poly's Society of Women Engineers has won Outstanding Regional Section 12 out of the last 14 years. This is its second national win.

Although Cal Poly is one of the smaller "large" universities, it has the largest Society of Women Engineers section in the nation, with 409 members. An increase of 105 members over the previous year was one of the factors that helped Cal Poly win, Harris said.

Helene Finger, the group's counselor and director of Cal Poly's Women's Engineering Program, said, "Dean Peter Lee has been very supportive, both financially and otherwise. Many people contributed to this win. All of the students deserve credit for a tremendous effort."

"This year our theme was 'Light the Fire Within,'" said Harris, who earned a bachelor's degree in industrial and manufacturing engineering at Cal Poly and comes from San Ramon. "Outreach and diversity are major goals of SWE. We sponsor a host of events designed to encourage young women to pursue careers in engineering."
During the year the group conducted hands-on activities at all of the elementary schools in the San Luis Coastal Unified School District. Cal Poly's women engineers chapter also teamed up with Cuesta College to host the first annual Expanding Your Horizons, a day in which 140 junior high school girls and teachers learned more about engineering and science through hands-on workshops and labs.

The chapter participates in local high school career fairs and this year held its third annual Girl Scout Day.

"Our efforts introduce an alternative career choice to young girls who might never consider engineering otherwise," Harris said. "We reached 600 young girls during the year."

Finger said the strength of the leadership is what makes the Cal Poly chapter so successful. "Their leaders draft a clear and aggressive strategic plan and then follow through by putting on successful programs," she said.

For more information about Cal Poly's Society of Women Engineers, call Finger at (805) 756-2350.